

Spring 1960

# The York Nativity Plays

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**SOUVENIR PROGRAM**

**1959 - 1960**

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***Trojan Players***

**Department of Speech  
Taylor University**

Please note these program omissions:

The three kings are played by Thomas Ringenberg, Dr. Paul Berkman, and Kenneth Blackwell.

Joseph is played by Vernon Gay and Richard Hersha.

Townspeople are played by Joan Haaland, Lou Larsen, Jean Kocher, Jean Leister, Sharon Rupp, Leah Medvidofsky, Gloria Moennig, and Mitchell Young.

The clown is played by Judy Boll.

The following people are to be added to the staff: Judy Boll, Mrs. Ida Herber, Mrs. Alice Shippey, Miss Lois Weed, Janet Case, Harry Haakenson, Mrs. Betty Pease, Mr. Burton Mahle.

The Trojan Players

Present

THE YORK NATIVITY PLAYS

Edited by J. S. Purvis



## PROGRAM NOTES

From every borough and hamlet around the city of York, came peasants and merchants, tradesmen and clergy on Corpus Christi Day to see the famous mystery cycle. From sunrise until sunset the 48 individual plays were enacted before an amused, excited, awe-struck populace.

Born in the church liturgy, the plays by 1370 were under the control of individual guilds. In each city, however, the unknown authors adhered to the liturgical purpose, to depict in one gigantic schematic presentation the message of God's plan for mankind's redemption. Beginning with the creation of the world, moving through Lucifer's fall, Adam's sin, and Old Testament events of Messianic significance, the nativity, life and passion of Christ, vividly depicting the Harrowing of Hell, the Antichrist and Christ's return, the plays never lost their original didacticism. This was a didacticism of utmost significance to a church whose laity could not read, a laity which depended upon visualization in cathedral window and dramatization of this kind for its religious education.

The English devised a unique processional system for the presentation of these plays. Other European cities erected stationary stages in the market place or before the cathedral; but each guild in York mounted its play on a large wagon. There were twelve stations in York and each pageant wagon stopped at each of the stations. In addition to the didactic quality of the

plays there are faith, beautiful in its simplicity, and a peculiar medieval humor mingled in an organic way found in few works of literature.

No attempt was made to establish "aesthetic distance" in the enactment of the plays, and the audience felt a close relationship to the players, as they crowded close to the wagon or observed from their second story windows, if they were fortunate enough to live close to a station.

The plays were filled with spectacle. No attempt, of course, was made at historical accuracy of costume or locale. They were a reflection of medieval England. The setting, even the cold of the Christmas night, is England's. The costumes of contemporary design would have been the most lavish the gild could have afforded. In tonight's production the costumes are designed after the religious painting of the Late Gothic Italian school.

Since we do not have from sunrise to sunset, the evening's presentation will include only the eight plays in the cycle which deal with the Nativity. For our production we've given a suggestion of a wagon to the stage. At the end of each play the lights will dim, indicating that that wagon will pass to another station. The next light signal will indicate the arrival of a new wagon. Typical medieval occurrences will be inserted between wagons.

Today when everything is either secular or religious, it is refreshing to momentarily embrace a culture, rich and significant, by no

means "dark," in which a healthy view is taken of the totality of life. The medieval mind conceives of God as One interested in beauty, color, animal and plant life, numbers, work, and birth, as well as in worship and salvation. One must approach the plays with this in mind if one finds them meaningful and real.

Only recently have literary and theatre scholars realized the significance of these works. The whole cycle was done as York's contribution to the Festival of Britain in 1951, 1954 and 1957. Concerning Union Theological Seminary's presentation of the Nativity section, Brooks Atkinson said:

"The power the plays have to stir the affections and reverence of modern audiences lies chiefly in their homeliness. The main outline of the story is familiar; it comes from whatever Bible the author used in his day. But the familiar details are from the English countryside--the rain, cold and darkness, Joseph's uncomplaining search for fuel and light, the instinctive placing of the babe between the beasts in the stable to keep him warm and Mary's thankfulness for their warm breath on a freezing, cheerless night.

"For the author of the York play instinctively re-created the Nativity in terms of his workaday existence in a medieval town. He wrote what he knew without pose of any kind. It is also interesting to note that he was as much at home in the Bible story as he was in the life of the town, where, like him, the people did not keep different aspects of their lives in separate compartments."



## CAST

In order of appearance:

Priest	Walter Whitmore
Gabriel	Jane Fugitt
Mary	Judy Lammon
Elizabeth	Noreen Mennigen
Joseph	Paul Smith
Maid 1	Maureen Kacsur
Maid 2	Sue Coates
Shepherd 1	John Oswalt
Shepherd 2	Walter Whitmore
Shepherd 3	Carlton Snow
Angel	Karole Bowen
Herod	Dennis Thompson
Knight 1	Stanley Spear
Knight 2	Jim Terhune
Herod's son	Kenneth Yoder
Messenger	Dennis Miller
Symeon	John Oswalt
Anna	Noreen Mennigen
Woman 1	Maureen Kacsur
Woman 2	Bertha Shepherd

## PLAY I

The Spicer's Play

The Annunciation

Essential for the didactic purpose of the plays was the priestly prologue full of doctrine and Scripture. The dew and earth simile is one of the most frequently used of the medieval symbols. The humility and awe which characterize Mary's response to the message of Gabriel are beautifully suggested, as is her anxious desire

to share the news with Elizabeth. The cloud device for Gabriel is typical, even to its squeak, of those used by the medieval scene technicians. The closeness of Mary's and Elizabeth's houses was of little concern to the medieval mind whose concepts of time and space were so different from ours.

## PLAY II

The Pewterer's and Founder's Play

Joseph's Revelation

The medieval artists and writers almost always thought of Joseph as an excitable, yet kind and loving, old man. The account of his marriage based on the wand which flowered in the temple is traditional as is Gabriel's revelation to him. The calm, yet victorious, answer which Mary gives to his accusations is moving in its confidence. The medievalist never thought of Mary as poor, but as queenly, hence her costume and her attendants, whose earliest function had been as midwives. What these writers would have done without sleep as an excuse for angelic visitation is hard to imagine. Typically Middle English wording, such as "bairn" for child, is noticeable. Joseph's direct conversation with the audience is exemplary of the kind of rapport which existed. His line, "But woman kind if they want help, / Yet would they no man knew their woe," and Mary's, "Forgiveness sir? Let be, for shame. / Such words should all good women lack," are two of many comments the actors made as marital advice or as observation on the opposite sex.

### PLAY III

#### The Tille Theker's Play      The Birth of Christ

The simplicity of the birth, the joy and adoration of the parents are deeply moving. Several financial accounts of the gild treasurers record payments for cord and pulleys for the star. The beasts are observable in most medieval painting of the nativity.

### PLAY IV

#### The Chaundeler's Play      The Shepherds

Most typically English of all the plays, the shepherd's visit, combining buccolic humor and ruggedness with deep devotion, is the best known of the medieval plays. The play on this subject done at Wakefield is widely known as The Second Shepherd's Play. The hesitancy with which these poor, ignorant men offer their trinkets to the Christ Child, and the obvious joy they themselves have in these gifts make for a strangely poignant scene.

### PLAY V

#### The Mason's and Goldsmith's Play Herod and the Kings

The characterizations of Noah's wife and Herod are probably the most independent creations of these medieval dramatists. The Satanic cruelty of Herod, the first of a long, long line of stage villains, is relieved only by his pomposity. Children would have hidden behind their mother's aprons

as he leaned over the pageant wagon to gleefully shake his finger in their faces. The confidential speeches of Herod's henchmen to Herod, supposedly unheard by the kings, are probably the first of their kind in theater history. The Goldsmith's production of the King's visit is only one of many practical gild-play assignments. Naturally the Goldsmiths could make the most lavish gifts, just as the Bakers could make the loaves for the Last Supper. The Cooks, who could stand more heat, produced the Harrowing of Hell, where real fire was used. The display of the gifts was certainly good advertising for the Goldsmiths. The prophetic reference of the kings as they present their gifts are extremely meaningful.

Herod's reference, "To Bethlehem-'tis but here at hand," seems especially significant when one realizes that with the proximity of these two settings, this was actually true.

### INTERMISSION

### PLAY VI

#### The Marshal's Play      The Flight into Egypt

Beautiful because it is deeply meaningful is the effect upon Joseph of the Child in his arms. This is climaxed by his statement, "I have our Help here in my arms." A real beast would have been used if the wagon were large enough, but the medieval technician would not have hesitated to use a substitute.



## PLAY VII

### The Hatmaker's, Mason's and Laborer's Play The Presentation in the Temple

Most highly liturgical of the plays, here is meaningfully depicted the culmination of the long, patient waiting of Anna and Symeon. Characteristic of the medieval writer's desire to introduce the salvation theme wherever he could, is Joseph's poignant reference to Jesus as "The Lamb of God."

## PLAY VIII

### The Girdler's and Nailer's Play The Slaughter of the Innocents

This play is indicative of the medievalists' delight in the gruesome and in bloodshed. Herod's early movement is based upon the discovery of almost the only stage direction for any of these plays, "Herod rages on the pagond and on the street also." The use of only two knights and two women to represent the whole slaughter is typical of the simplification found in these plays.

## PRODUCTION STAFF

Director-Designer	Jim Young
Assistant Directors	Richard Hersha Marcia Van Doren Janet Watson
Assistant Technical Director	Dennis Thompson
Costumer	June Young
Stage	Joan Haaland Richard Hersha, Paul Pascoe, Veryl Roth Sandra Rupp, Beulah Reinmiller
Costumes	Marjorie Komp Elsbeth Barris, Barbara Crowder Enid Hansen, Dorothy Hand Lou Larson, Margaret Nelson
Properties	Dick Boka Roger Erfourth, Marcia Van Doren
Make-up	Lloyd Tucker Nancy Atha, Else Reitenback, Pat Orem Cathie McAndrews, Audrey Raab
Publicity	Leslie Goodner, Sue Coates
Lighting	Sterling Davis, Tom Ringenberg
House	Elaine Brunz, Cathie Mc Andrews
Music	Dale Shepfer Barbara Abbey, Stanley Spear, Judy Sweet Janet Watson



## TEATE MONTICUCCI:9

